POSTSCRIPT: COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP THROUGH SCHOOLS

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It has been both moving and informative to read through these chapters. The accounts of youth leadership and agency in these stories are those that I have most appreciated in this book. In my experience, it is fairly common to find schools working with parents. Similarly, schools generally liaise with other organisations to support children and their families. Sometimes they consult with children. It is very rare, however, for children and parents to have a leadership role in taking action so it is not often I get to read such an inspiring set of accounts of community engagement and community organising in schools.

In this piece, I draw on my own experiences as a practitioner and researcher to reflect on why schools don't focus more on community engagement and why, when they do, the form it takes tends to be informed by professional views of community needs which are not necessarily the needs that local communities would prioritise. I talk about the development of Children's Communities and ponder reasons for the general lack, with some exceptions, of active child leadership in school community engagement. I finish with a call to action for schools, communities, and organisations they partner with, to find new ways of working together. This is crucial as we continue to negotiate living with the impact of the last decade of austerity and of COVID-19.

WHERE AM I COMING FROM?

Motivating my work is how I think about people, organisations, professional roles, and change. One of the beliefs I hold is that we all have needs and capabilities, and that this applies even to those who appear most in need and even when their knowledge and skills are less clearly visible, and that we should work with people in ways that recognise their capabilities[18]. Lived experience, especially that of those who are marginalised, needs to be valued alongside professional knowledge.

It is, therefore, not surprising that whilst I have been working in schools, I have always sought to develop collaboration in one form or another. As a practicing educational psychologist, I tried to enable parents feel more involved as partners in special needs assessment – and this became a focus of my PhD[19]. I designed and wrote letters and psychological assessment reports directly for and to children (and found they were also appreciated by parents and practitioners).

In my experience, solving problems in communities requires the combined expertise of organisations and the community working together. Solutions will always be lacking if the community is left out. People should be actively involved in their own change process rather than approached as passive recipients of services.

WHAT I LEARNT ABOUT PARTNERSHIP FROM RESEARCHING EXTENDED SCHOOLS

While leading the research evaluating extended schools[20] a decade ago, I uncovered an exciting series of projects around child and adult support, extra-curricular activities, childcare, and community engagement[21]. School staff were enthusiastic about the provisions they were developing and about their collaboration with other agencies.

The main learning from this research was that schools could not go it alone in addressing problems in neighbourhoods that were often systemic (underinvestment in adult skills, rising child poverty, a lack of

[18] See Todd, L. (2007) *Partnerships for Inclusive Education. A critical approach to collaborative working*. London: Routledge.
[19] Thesis title: *The Problematic of Partnership in the Assessment of Special Educational Needs*. Newcastle University (2000).
[20] Extended schools and extended services were a form of community schooling that were policies in the New Labour years, 1999-2010.
[21] See Cummings, C., Dyson, A., & Todd, L. (2011). *Beyond the School Gates: can full service and extended schools overcome disadvantage?* London: Routlege.

affordable housing, etc.). Schools' aims tended to include trying to engage with the local community in some way for the common good and working in partnership with other organisations. There was a sense from school staff that they felt able to be creative and consequently really make a difference to people's lives.

However, I also saw a striking omission.

The model of extended schools was about the delivery of services with professionals very clearly taking the lead[22]. I rarely had the sense that co-creation with children, parents or communities was part of the vision of these schools. Notable exceptions to this included a school that had a film club created and managed by pupils, and another that had an active parent committee involved in making decisions about the direction of the extended strategy. It continues to be my experience that schools that develop initiatives in ways that give children leadership are very much the exception.

WHY THE SCARCITY OF CHILD AGENCY AND LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS?

I have often wondered why it was so difficult for schools to involve children in community developments. I have speculated about whether it was a lack of belief by schools in the capability of children and families. Or whether there were other assumptions about local people that were colouring professional engagement. Perhaps it was policy mandates around the primacy of safeguarding, or the professional cultures that situate children in certain ways. Perhaps part of the problem has been a lack of time or the skills to help develop leadership in children. Our evaluation of extended schools found transformative impacts on individual children and their families and an economic analysis found that the benefits for individuals far outweighed the costs[23].

However, I wondered how much more impact there could have been had the actions of the extended schools engaged those same children and families in a process where they were involved in working with others on the kinds of community change that they had helped to identify and make happen.

A barrier to this kind of collaborative working today is the high stakes testing regime in schools and the related Ofsted requirements. Schools can regard community work as distracting them from their core teaching and learning activities. Some schools have been able to combine efforts to maintain educational attainment gains at the same time as being an extended school. Some schools have built upon the learning they have gained from providing extended services to create a new model of how they could operate and become children's communities[24]. A 'Children's Community' brings together a range of existing services, local government, charities, cultural organisations, and businesses in a specific geographical area to work in a coordinated way to tackle childhood disadvantage, with a specific focus, from cradle to career, on all the contexts in which children live and learn[25]. The aim is for the organisations in a locality to work together with each other and with the community in order to evolve asset-based approaches to disadvantage. Over the last few years, the numbers of children's communities have been growing across the UK in areas such as Kirklees, Glasgow, London, Manchester, and Newcastle. An exciting and relatively new development, as demonstrated in the chapters in this book, is that some of these schools are engaging in community organising in which children are being supported to take on leadership.

DEVELOPING MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT

So, what next? How can more schools understand their role as part of their communities and enable children to collaborate to bring about change? They cannot wait for national incentives from government policy or Ofsted – although this would be welcome. There is a need to act now. A decade of austerity has impacted

[22] See Cummings, C., Dyson, A., & Todd, L. (2007). 'Towards extended schools? How education and other professionals understand community-oriented schooling' in *Children and Society, 21*, 189-200.

[23] See Cummings, C., Dyson, A., & Todd, L. (2011). *Beyond the School Gates: can full service and extended schools overcome disadvantage?* London: Routlege.

[24] Named children's communities after the adoption by Save the Children of the model of the Harlem Children's Zone that has some similarities with extended schools.

[25] See Dyson, A, Kerr, K, Heath, L and Hodson, P (2016) 'From School to Children's Community: The Development of Manchester Communication Academy, England' in *Developing Community Schools, Community Learning Centers*, 346-383). See also *Extended-Service Schools and Multi-Service Schools: International Exemplars for Practice, Policy, and Research*, edited by Lawson, HA and Van Veen, D. The Hague, NL: Springer International.

negatively on civic society with cuts to services and cash-strapped charities having to deliver front line services. Austerity has diminished the capacity of civil society to respond to COVID-19 which has had a greater impact on those already disadvantaged. Change needs to come through organisations working together and making sure communities are fully involved. We see many examples of this happening in this book, in which schools have played a key role in meeting community needs: increasing local affordable housing provision; tackling knife crime and building safer communities; improving local transport; and reducing the stigma of mental health.

Children's lives cannot wait. When I read the accounts in this book of children's engagement in community organising, I know that all children need the benefits of these approaches right now. For instance, the Young Citizen Action Group (YCAG) in Barking and Dagenham had success with improving transport to school and taking over land for a community garden. Young people in REACH Academy ran a local campaign against domestic violence, St Antony's Primary School children campaigned to win affordable housing in Newham, students from Mountain's Ash Secondary School in South Wales were supported by First Give to develop a dilapidated pool into a community resource. Paraphrasing from the accounts, and as a result of community organising, children's experiences of learning are (unusually for school) connected to real life problems. Students have been taken on a journey that gives them responsibility, many skills have been developed such as in presenting their case to adults in authority, and their sense of agency has been galvanised. I agree with the writers that claims this learning will last a lifetime.

The essential role of schools to society as a whole and to our communities has never been so apparent as during the COVID-19 lockdown. Schools have taken responsibility for giving out meal vouchers (in some cases through regular door-to-door deliveries), checking up on vulnerable pupils, supplying materials for pupils to learn at home, and staying open to care for vulnerable children and those of keyworkers. In the case of the latter, schools have been vital in order to support the health of the nation and keep the NHS and other vital services working. Children have missed their teachers and their friends. It will not be possible to claim in the future that schools are only important for the educational aspirations they can fulfil. Ofsted could play an important role in future in giving schools the freedom to conceptualise wellbeing as wider in scope than educational achievement alone.

A CALL TO ACTION: NEW WAYS OF WORKING TOGETHER

What practical steps can schools take if they want to get more involved in community action and if they want to have children (and others such as parents) helping to drive the action? Reflecting on schools' mission and values is a good place to start. Taking stock of the current projects going on in a school, and the potential partners they could work with in their locality, can stimulate ideas about how to grow community involvement. It is likely that schools already have community links that can be developed further. There are many organisations that can offer training in skills that will help them to organise with their communities or can link with the school to develop actions.

The time-honoured model of community organising used by Citizens UK[26] helps schools to focus on the development of long-term relationships and long-term support, so that they can continue to help communities by using a range of approaches flexibly over time. Children can develop a critical and practical understanding of the nature of power and how they can build and use power themselves to be able to affect change. Listening campaigns teach so many skills at different levels, from the development of interpersonal skills to experiencing the way that listening within a community can bring everyone into the process of deciding actions. Becoming a member of Citizens UK means that people in a school can start to build relationships with those in other member organisations and they can access community organising training. In our children's community in Newcastle, Karen Laing and I are using a community organising approach (with support from Tyne and Wear Citizens) with parents to enable them to organise and take action to help create the kind of educational opportunities they want for themselves and their families.

[26] For more on Citizens UK's approach, to community organising see the Introduction by Sebastien Chapleau and the Provocation in this book by Neil Jameson.

In my experience, you can never have too many ideas about how to engage children and young people's agency. There are many charities working with young people that have good ideas, for example Investing in Children (IiC)[27], a charity based in Durham which has been engaging with children and young people as researchers for the last 20 years. IiC has developed practices, strategies and policies designed to engage older children actively in consultation and decision-making processes in matters affecting their lives. One of their approaches is to undertake an 'agenda day' in which (typically) 10-25 diverse young people aged 13-18 years meet in an adult-free environment to express their views, facilitated by other young people who have met beforehand to plan the day. The facilitators decide which questions are to be asked of the invited young people that would give them the best opportunity to express their views. The outcomes of agenda days have contributed to the development of many different organisations including schools, health services, sports facilities, the delivery of social support services and many more. IiC is constantly evolving the methods that they use and young people are fully included in this development.

Another idea is to put children firmly at the centre of a new project. Children North East, a child poverty charity, did just this when developing a programme to remove barriers to learning which exist because of the impacts of living in poverty. Poverty Proofing the School Day is an audit for schools, developed by the charity Children North East with the North East Child Poverty Commission[28]. The idea came from children in the first place, and child researchers from four schools devised the audit. The final audit process requires all children in a school to be consulted about their views on which school practices stigmatise poor children.

A final example suggests that small changes in practice can make a big difference. Sometimes putting young people in the driving seat is a matter simply of changing how you ask questions. Karen Laing, a senior researcher from Newcastle University, conducted a series of focus groups with girls aged 14-16. Instead of asking the girls about why they were not taking up some community resources (the brief given to Karen), Karen asked them if they could suggest what questions she should ask to understand what it was like being a girl in Wallsend. This put the whole conversation on a very different footing. Instead of the girls following Karen's agenda, the girls had been asked for their agenda for Karen to follow. The conversations were not always easy to conduct but by the end Karen knew much more about being a girl in an area in the North East. What she found was very different to what school managers had been expecting and far more useful to them. But even more important, managers now realised that they too could consult with the girls when other questions came up in school. Instead of consulting with girls based on adult assumptions of what was important, the approach enabled girls to talk about what was important to them. This led to a much greater understanding of how professionals could engage with them and a realisation that the assumptions they previously held were misguided.

The longstanding and established practices of community organising and these examples of innovative ideas can help us to think about how we can help schools to engage with young people and families in their local communities. We will need to find new ways of working in the coming months, and possibly years, to respond to the impact of austerity, to challenge the impact of rising child poverty, while social distancing is in place, and while the after-effects of the virus show themselves. There is no room for complacency, and we must constantly evolve to meet new challenges and find new ways of doing things, and of connecting as people if we are to find the solutions to some of our most entrenched problems.

[27] See www.investinginchildren.net.

[28] See www.children-ne.org.uk/poverty-proofing-the-school-day. See also Mazzoli Smith L, Todd L. (2018) Conceptualising poverty as a barrier to learning through 'Poverty Proofing' the School Day in *British Educational Research Journal*. See also Mazzoli-Smith L, Todd L. (2016) *Poverty Proofing the School Day: Evaluation and development report.*